

**REMARKS OF SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI  
TO THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS  
TUESDAY FEBRUARY 27, 2007  
WASHINGTON, DC**

**President Garcia, Tribal Leaders, Elders and Friends.**

**Good morning. It is an honor and a pleasure to be with you once again and to update you on my work on behalf of American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian peoples.**

**I would also like to extend a special welcome to my friends from Alaska.**

**The Alaska Federation of Natives estimates that 21 percent of our State's population is Alaska Native. Alaska's population is now about 670,000 people.**

**I understand that Alaska has a greater percentage of Native people when compared with the State's total population than any of the Lower 48 states. That is a tremendous source of pride for me and for my fellow Alaskans.**

**While many of our Native people live in some 239 traditional villages, a growing number of Native people live in Anchorage – our State's largest city.**

**We call Anchorage the largest Native village in Alaska. Here are some of the reasons why.**

**The moment you get off the plane in Anchorage you are greeted by museum quality displays of Alaska Native arts and crafts.**

**Native dance groups perform in Anchorage throughout the year.**

**Anchorage is home to the world class Alaska Native Medical Center – 100% Native owned and operated – proof positive that self governance works.**

**It is also home to the Alaska Native Heritage Center which interprets our Aleut, Indian and Eskimo cultures to thousands of visitors from around the world.**

**It is home to a full time 24 hour Native radio station – KNBA 90.3 FM.**

**And I know this has nothing to do with the site of the mid-year meeting, but Alaska is home to our very own Jackie Johnson -- an Alaskan treasure in her own right.**

**I'm not just telling you this just because I'm proud of Alaska. OK, may be I am. Make no mistake about it – Alaskans are proud of Alaska.**

**I'm also telling this to invite you – and entice you – to come to Anchorage this June.**

**If you have never been to Alaska June is the perfect time of year to get acquainted. And if you've been there before you know how great ideas flow when you are meeting in a beautiful and creative place.**

**OK – the commercial's over. And now to the congressional update.**

**This is the fifth consecutive year I'm serving on the Senate Indian Affairs Committee. Yes I'm part of the minority, but as Chairman Dorgan points out time and again, Indian issues are not only bi-partisan... they are non-partisan.**

**The 110<sup>th</sup> Congress is only about 8 weeks old but working together we've already scored some important victories for Indian country.**

- **We turned back an attempt to prohibit tribes from participating in the political process. We did this on a bipartisan basis and I'm proud to tell you that both of Alaska's Senators stuck with Indian country on this crucial vote.**
- **There was wording in the Senate version of the ethics bill that would have made it difficult for tribes to hire former federal employees to deliver health and social service programs. I worked with the leadership of our Indian Affairs Committee to tweak that language so it works for tribes that have chosen the road to self determination and self governance.**

**Once again, I've joined with Senator Dorgan on legislation to address the tragedy of youth suicide in our Native communities. The bill would make federal funds available to deliver behavioral health services to our Native young people using telemedicine technology. It would give young people who live in some of the very most isolated places access to help when they need it most.**

**Last year the Senate passed the bill but there wasn't time for the House to consider it. The Indian Affairs Committee has moved quickly to put the bill back on the Senate calendar. That's how important this bill is. I hope we will pass it through the Senate early in this session and we can get it out of the House of Representatives this year.**

**We've not forgotten the need to reauthorize the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. Thank you, Indian country, for your support of Alaska's Dental Health Aide Therapist Program last year. With your help we beat back efforts to shut down this innovative program.**

**And we also need to find the money to fund the Esther Martinez Native Language Act which was signed into law late last year. Those are some of my priorities this year.**

**I'm very excited about a new nonpartisan initiative by Senator Dorgan and Senator Thomas to bring the committee out to Indian Country. Less than one week after the committee held its organizational meeting, our leaders were on a plane for the first of a series of listening sessions with tribal leaders. I understand these**

listening sessions continued last week while I was in Alaska. I hope to be able to participate in future sessions.

This is an impressive start for the Indian Affairs Committee and I'm proud to be part of it.

This Congress I am serving on another committee that is important to Indian Country.

That's the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. I'm the first Alaska Senator ever to serve on this committee. I am especially interested in the committee's health and education agendas.

The HELP Committee, as you know, has jurisdiction over "No Child Left Behind" and we have to make it work better in our Native communities.

We have to make it work in our Native communities and that takes effort. In our Native communities education doesn't just mean reading, writing, math and science. Culture and Native preservation language are also important aims of our educational system.

The evidence presented to the Indian Affairs Committee strongly suggests that Native children who are educated in harmony with their culture do better in school, better at work, and better in life.

Our Native children should not have to choose between an educational experience that emphasizes culture and an educational experience that emphasizes preparation for the job market.

The educational experience needs to prepare our Native youth to lead their Native communities and it needs to prepare our Native youth to fully participate in the global economy.

**It needs to be an educational experience which strengthens the self-esteem of our young people. School should be a source of enlightenment... not a source of frustration.**

**I hope to use my position on the HELP committee to help make the “No Child Left Behind” legislation work better in American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities. I look forward to receiving your suggestions on how to do that.**

**Finally, I want to put in a plug for your continued support of Senator Akaka’s Native Hawaiian recognition legislation. NCAI’s support was so critical last year when we came within a very few votes of stopping a filibuster. We had a bipartisan majority in the Senate but we fell short of the 60 votes we needed. Let’s continue to make justice for Native Hawaiians a priority in this 110<sup>th</sup> Congress.**

**When I joined the Indian Affairs Committee in 2003, I was honored that Chief Ben Nighthorse Campbell took me under this wing. Time and time again, Senator Campbell drummed into me that the Indian Affairs Committee is the one committee of Congress that listens to Indian Country. This is one committee among all in the Congress that is specifically charged with the responsibility of standing up for our Native peoples. I’ve taken that to heart.**

**I’m feeling very good about the energy level in the Indian Affairs Committee this year. We need to maintain that high level of energy because it takes a lot of energy to address the challenges in Indian country.**

**Make no mistake about it – they are the same challenges whether you are on Pine Ridge, Red Lake, Navajo, or in the Native Village of Savoonga out on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea.**

**In unity, there is strength. In unity, we will conquer those challenges.**

**DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY**  
**FEBRUARY 22, 2007**

**Have a great meeting. See you in Anchorage June 10-13.**